

Plato on the media

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In book 10 of his *Republic*, Plato's speaker Socrates urges that the poets should, with very few exceptions, be banned from the ideal city he and his companions have been designing. If you think this a ridiculous idea, you are not alone. Not only is censorship intrinsically damaging in any society, you may object, but anyway, who could be more harmless to society than a bunch of poets? My aim is to persuade you, not that Plato's conclusion is right, but that his argument is one that should bother us.

Plato's damning conclusion about poetry is argued on various grounds, but I shall concentrate on just one: that all representational art, including poetry, is bad in so far as it dangerously distorts the truth.

Now it is not hard to agree that representational art can distort the truth. In our own culture television soaps, romantic novels, and virtual reality games are prominent culprits. But Plato does not say merely that the representational arts can distort the truth. He says that they do so inevitably. Can we make sense of this?

Pure justice

To understand Plato's point, we must take a look at his theory of Forms. His critique of poetry provides a good entry route for those who want an introduction to this celebrated theory.

Philosophers' task is to find out things' real natures, their essences, but it is easy for them to go about it the wrong way. Suppose you want to find out what justice is. You might think that studying what goes on in the law courts would be the way to get started. But in fact, Plato will object, that is a hopeless approach. In the law courts you would witness a complex mixture of justice and injustice, and even one and the same decision might turn out to be both just and unjust. Compare an example used by Plato at the beginning of the *Republic*. You might think justice requires giving people whatever you owe them, but what if you owed someone a weapon, because you had borrowed it from them, and in the meantime they had gone berserk? How just would it make you if you handed it back to them in those circumstances?

No, Plato insists, in order to find out about the essential nature of justice you must think, not about inevitably messy and ambiguous individual cases, but about justice itself, pure justice viewed in its own right, independently of any specific circumstances in which it might happen to be manifested.

This pure justice is what Plato would call the 'Form' of justice. He is convinced that it is something real, out there waiting for us to discover it, rather than, as many people held in his day, a mere human invention. Discovering the essential nature of justice is as scientific as discovering, say, the properties of prime numbers, although in Plato's view it is a much rarer and more difficult accomplishment than mathematical knowledge. As for those necessarily messy and imperfect cases of justice, such as a court's (on balance) just verdict, these in Plato's view are merely imperfect resemblances of pure justice. Unlike them, the Form of justice is an ideal model of justice. It sets the standard for what it is to be just, while justice as we experience it in everyday life can never be more than a poor approximation to that standard.

People living in the idealized society which Plato is envisaging in the *Republic* need to understand the nature of justice so far as their intellectual capacities permit. The very ablest of them, to whom the government of his ideal city will be entrusted, will be philosophers, and they will directly know the Form of

justice through long and painstaking study. The remaining citizens will not be, in the same way, experts on justice, but even they will benefit from direct exposure to authentically just people, laws, and institutions. What is much less desirable in Plato's eyes is that the citizens should instead get their understanding of justice from literature, for example by looking to the *Iliad*'s portrayal of Nestor. For literature can at best provide imperfect imitations — that is, mere external descriptions — of events and individuals which are likewise themselves at best imperfect imitations of the real essence of justice, its Form. In this way, representational artists are operating at two removes from reality. And poetry, even that of a supposedly unimpeachable authority like Homer, is not the privileged window onto the truth that conventional Greek education takes it to be.

I have set out Plato's position here with the example of justice, because justice is both the special theme of the *Republic* and in Plato's view the vital key to a happy society. A society which falls back on Homer or other poets for its understanding of justice is, according to his argument, a morally impoverished one.

The form of couch

The actual illustration Plato uses, though, is on the face of it an unexpectedly banal one. Looking at a painting of a couch (or 'bed' in many translations), he argues, would be a very poor way of understanding what a couch really is. Its painter was merely imitating in two dimensions a three-dimensional couch. And that three-dimensional couch was itself no more than an imperfect imitation of the Form of couch. This is because the carpenter, when setting out to build the couch, started by asking himself what is the essential nature of a couch — or, to put it in Plato's terminology, by turning his mind's eye to the Form of couch — and then embodied that essential nature as best he could in the wood, fabric, and other materials at his disposal. The couch he built is an unavoidably imperfect copy of the Form; and the painting of it is an imperfect (e.g. because only two-dimensional) copy of that imperfect copy.

But why this example? An understanding of the ideal essence of couches might make life fractionally more comfortable in Plato's ideal city, but there is no way that he would consider that a significant contribution to happiness. Nor could the city be much harmed if misleadingly oversimplified paintings of couches were on display! The reason he chooses such a mundane example is, I think, the need to build his case on what his readers already know. Understanding the Form of justice is a rare intellectual accomplishment. Understanding the Form of couch, on the other hand, is something that any good carpenter has already managed, and any of us who has ever practised a creative art understands the principles involved. With a little reflection, we can all appreciate from our own experience how a manufactured object is at best an approximation to an ideal blueprint, and likewise how a picture is necessarily an imperfect likeness of its original.

So try thinking of the couch-and-painting example as no more than a trivial one, meant to illustrate *in general terms* the distance that lies between art and reality. It is the example I described before it — that of trying to learn about justice from the poets — that comes closest to capturing Plato's real point.

And he is surely raising a good question. When we discuss

moral issues today, how dependent have we become on what we have learnt – or think we have learnt – from movies and novels? It is after all these, along with television, that have taken over in our society the place that poetry occupied in Plato's. No one in their right mind would today advocate banning poetry. But what about television?

Television and the perfect society

That brings us back to the question of censorship. You probably think, as I do, that to ban an entire artistic medium such as television, just because it misleadingly oversimplifies important truths, would be a damaging betrayal of our basic values. But let's not forget that Plato's agenda in the *Republic* is to describe, as a theoretical exercise, what the best possible society would be like. If he thinks that it would be one without poets, he may express that in terms of legal exclusion, but what he is ultimately trying to get across is the social advantages of living without harmful art forms. Likewise, even if we would not tolerate a legal ban on television, we might well agree that the best possible society would be one without television.

Plato is always at his best when devising new perspectives which will force us to rethink our most cherished assumptions. In this case, he singles out the medium with the most powerful influence on how people think in his own society. And he brings in his own theory of the structure of reality to persuade his fellow-citizens that that medium's influence, for all the enjoyment it offers, is less benign than they assume. Whether or not we agree with his startlingly radical conclusions, we owe it to Plato to view our own media through the critical lens he has supplied.

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